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ABSTRACT

This magazine, which is designed for managers of Australian companies who are interested in raising their firms' productivity and meeting quality standards by developing a comprehensive approach to workplace communication, includes a variety of materials for and about improving communication within their organization. Most of the magazine is devoted to profiles of seven Australian companies that have boosted their productivity and raised their employees' performance by a variety of workplace communications improvement strategies including the following: redesigning customer forms and circulars; eliminating jargon from company documents; providing computer-based training; and using computers to communicate. Also included throughout the magazine are the following: discussion of the role of organizational communication in total quality management; tips for developing/revising documents; hints for effective communication; common myths about being reader friendly; picking a communication problem to solve; lists of the benefits of reader-friendly documents; list of seven suggested readings regarding good communication; and sources of funding and technical assistance. (MN)

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Communicating for success

- Save money
- Avoid costly errors
- Be more competitive
- Make your job easier

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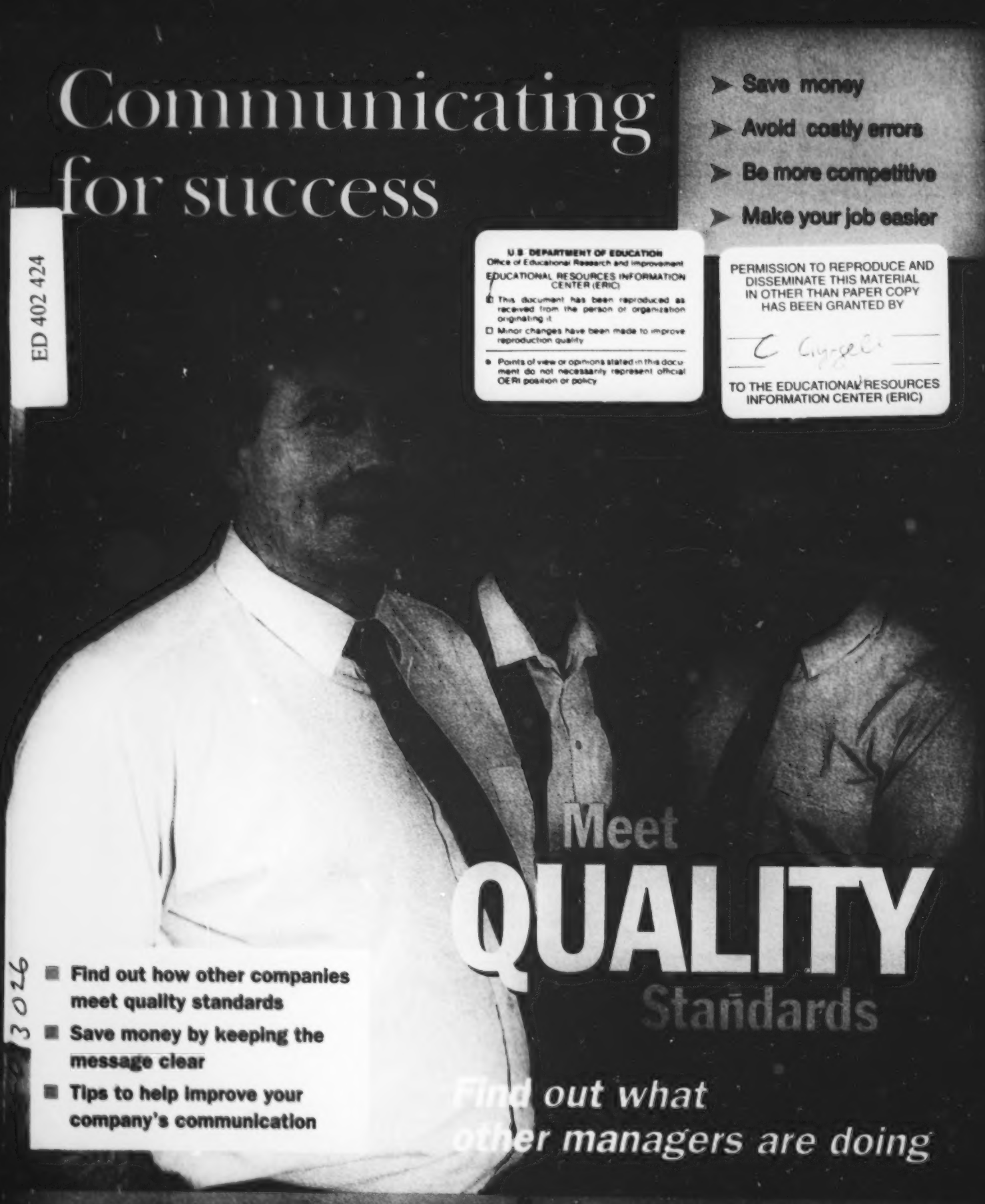

Meet QUALITY Standards

- Find out how other companies meet quality standards
- Save money by keeping the message clear
- Tips to help improve your company's communication

Find out what other managers are doing

How better workplace communication can work for you

Managers reveal why communication is important

The key to quality for small company

'Effective workplace communication is part of our quality assurance strategy.

'We're competing for quality awards with some of the biggest companies in Australia [APAC has 170 employees]. The assessors for these awards don't just talk to management, they go on to the shop floor. Unless our operators can demonstrate that they play a part in ensuring quality, you're not considered.

'The fact that we've got to the national finals shows our strategy is working.'

– Ron Torkildsen, Manager Human Resources and Training, Australian Pacific Air Conditioners

Target carefully and test

'We aim to make sure that the language we use in the workplace is appropriate to the target audience.

'We want to know that the right amount of information is delivered and that it has been understood.

'Instead of asking "Do you understand the instructions?" we ask, "What do you have to do?" People will always answer "yes" to the first question, but the real test of understanding lies in their answer to the second question.'

– Margrit Stocker, Training and Development Consultant (Open Learning), BHP Ltd.

Write for your audience

'In a large company where a lot of the communication has to be written, the writers must keep the purpose of the message in mind. They need to think about their readers.

'At Coca-Cola Bottlers Sydney, many of the managers are becoming aware of plain English issues. They work with trainers to make sure that memos and training material is produced in the most appropriate way.'

– Margaret Lopez, Enterprise based teacher, Coca-Cola Bottlers, Sydney

Make it go two ways

'At Meadow Lea we encourage clear communication, particularly in the production environment. We promote the policy that communication goes two ways – messages must be clearly sent to be clearly received.'

– Suzanne Greig, NSW Training Manager, Meadow Lea

Integrate and evaluate

'Integration is the key to the effectiveness of our communication programs. The benefits – reduction in misinformation, development of trust and an "aware" workforce – are enormous.'

– Phil McMahon, Human Resource Manager, Monroe Australia

Improve your performance

To raise productivity and meet quality standards, your company must make sure all your communication is working in your favour – not costing you money.

Every time someone misunderstands something they read at work, your company could be losing money.

Whenever anyone has to read something twice, or get a second opinion, a communication problem exists.

Managers and staff in the 1990s work in a much more complicated environment than existed in the past. Total Quality Management (TQM), strict quality accreditation standards, cooperative teamwork, flexibility and orientation to customer service are just some of the reasons why the modern workplace needs effective communication.

Clear communication also reduces the number of workplace accidents. Safety instructions must be clear to be effective. Being able to read the words alone is not enough – the message must be understood.

Successful companies lead the way

Enterprises around Australia are beginning to realise that effective communication in the workplace is essential.

Companies must ensure that internal communication – whether it's memos, signs, manuals or posters – are understood.

It's of little use training employees to improve their literacy skills if what they have to read is unintelligible.

Producing reader friendly documents is a major part of effective internal communication.

Think of the audience

Before you start to write, stop to think about what your message is going to be.

Make sure the method of communication is the best for the task in hand. Just because your firm has always used a particular form or document, doesn't necessarily mean it's the most effective way to get the message across.

Design is crucial

Design and format are vital. Think carefully about the way information is distributed, and make sure it matches the needs of the people you want to reach.

Operating instructions contained in a booklet or manual may be easier to understand on an illustrated poster, or perhaps on video.

Spend some money to get it right

Don't be put off by spending a little extra at first. Weigh up your budget and the number of readers. If you're trying to get a message to 1000 people, it may be worth the investment in professional help to make sure the message works.

Test everything on the target group

Test the document you produce on the people it's intended for before going any further. They'll quickly tell you if what you've done works or not.

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About this magazine

This magazine explains the importance of reader friendly communication for your company. Inside you will see how successful companies – both large and small – have reaped the benefits of good communication.

With a comprehensive approach to workplace communication, your company's investment in training will pay off.

For more free copies of this magazine
Tel: (06) 240 9086 Fax: (06) 240 9202

Quality standards demand good communication

The need to meet international quality standards and implement new work practices have made a lot of companies take a second look at their internal communication.

Companies like Ajax Spurway Fasteners in Sydney which plans to teach managers how to communicate more effectively. It's part of a drive to gain accreditation to quality standard AS3902, the manufacturing benchmark standard.

Quality accreditation requires a business to review its entire operations and document procedures necessary to satisfy customers. After gaining accreditation, companies undergo annual audits to ensure standards are maintained.

'It's not just about quality control over your products. AS3902 is about building quality into all your processes,' said general manager Garry Ferris. 'It's a big task which requires an enormous amount of training with language and communication as the key,' he said.

'We want to simplify our documents because we probably haven't given sufficient thought to whether people can understand them.

'We need training to write plain, clear English. We need to learn how much detail to put in a memo, how to run a meeting efficiently and effectively and what sort of topics to cover,' said Garry.

'We want to simplify our documents because we probably haven't given sufficient thought to whether people are able to understand them.

– Garry Ferris,
general manager,
Ajax Spurway Fasteners

Managers and staff at Ajax Spurway Fasteners will all learn to improve their communication skills.

PHOTOS: TRACEY SCHRAMM

What managers need to know

This Ajax Spurway Fasteners employee benefits from clear communication when he has to follow on-screen directions.

Managers in the1990s have a new role. Part of the manager's job is to encourage and inspire people to work in autonomous units. This replaces a management style based on instructions issued from the top of a hierarchy.

Managers must learn to write and speak in a way which ensures their messages are clearly understood.

'Management is passing responsibility on to small groups. The success of this teamwork depends on effective communication,' says Bill Cope, from the NLLIA Centre for Workplace Communication and Culture.

'The new model of work is extremely communication intensive,' says Bill.

'There is a new emphasis on teamwork which depends on effective oral and written communication. Multi-skilling makes unprecedented demands for clear communication,' he said.

The new manager needs new skills

Consultant Linda Wyse (right), of Linda Wyse and Associates in Melbourne, believes managers must learn to write and speak in a way which ensures their messages are clearly understood.

'Managers don't always realise they need to improve their communication skills. They may need to modify their language to make sure they're sending clear messages,' she said.

Computer based training must be clear

The growth of screen-based information and computer-driven machinery has fuelled the demand for clearer communication.

Reader friendly documents are essential for the training that supports workplace change. As Garry Ferris of Ajax Spurway Fasteners said, 'Workers need training to move up the career path. Plain English makes training material and computer information more accessible.' ❸

PHOTO: TRACEY SCHRAMM

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Drilling home a clear safety message

Confusing language can turn a straightforward competency test into an assessment of a worker's capacity to interpret complicated grammar.

At one workplace most people could not answer these written questions correctly:

1. Before starting any electric power tool, what must be worn by the operator?
2. If you find a power tool to be broken after doing an inspection what should you do with it?
3. If a work area is wet or damp, why must we not use electric power tools in that area?

An English in the Workplace teacher changed the questions to:

1. **What should you wear when you use electric power tools?**
2. **What do you do if a power tool is broken or faulty?**
3. **Why is it dangerous to use electric power tools in wet or damp areas?**

All members of the group answered the modified questions correctly.

Source: Giselle Mawer, research project officer, National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research, Macquarie University and NSW Adult Migrant Education Service.

Good communication creates a smooth system

These are all situations where reader friendly communication is important.

Safety

Warning and safety signs, accident reports, equipment manuals, product data sheets

Training

Manuals, notices, tests

Meetings

Minutes, agendas

New employees

Induction manuals, employment forms

Information flow between managers and staff

Notices, memos, policy documents, forms, quality reports, customer service reports, shift reports, timesheets

Communicating technical information

Instructions, standard operating procedures, reports, equipment manuals

ILLUSTRATION: MARGIE RENVOIZE

Source: *Key Questions for Addressing Workplace Communication Needs*, Labor Council of NSW and Chamber of Manufactures of NSW.

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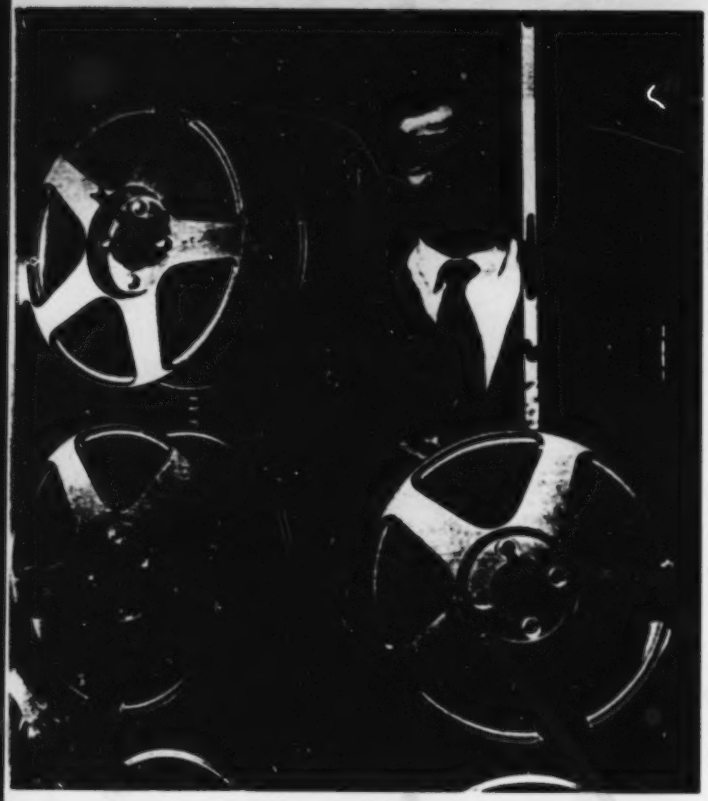


PHOTO: ROBERT BOOKA

Improving workplace documents can potentially save hundreds of thousands of dollars says Andrew Gleeson, general manager (human resources) Arrowcrest.

It saves time and money say company managers

'Try it and you won't regret it!' is the message from companies now using reader friendly communication in the workplace.

The Adelaide-based Arrowcrest Group has cut staff time and won praise from WorkCover through a reader friendly approach to workers' compensation claims.

'It has the potential to save us hundreds of thousands of dollars a year,' said general manager (human resources), Andrew Gleeson. ●

Good communication saves the NRMA a fortune

The NRMA is encouraging a reader friendly approach to its internal staff communications after saving close to half a million dollars a year by using reader friendly documents for its customers.

Manager of the NRMA's information design group, Jenny Burn, said the rate of mistakes made by insurance policy holders has fallen from almost 100 per cent, to 20-30 per cent following the introduction of rewritten and redesigned policies and forms. This has meant estimated savings in staff time of $500,000 per year.

The NSW motorists' association has now turned its attention to internal communications, with a style guide and redesigned documents and forms.

The new NRMA pay slip

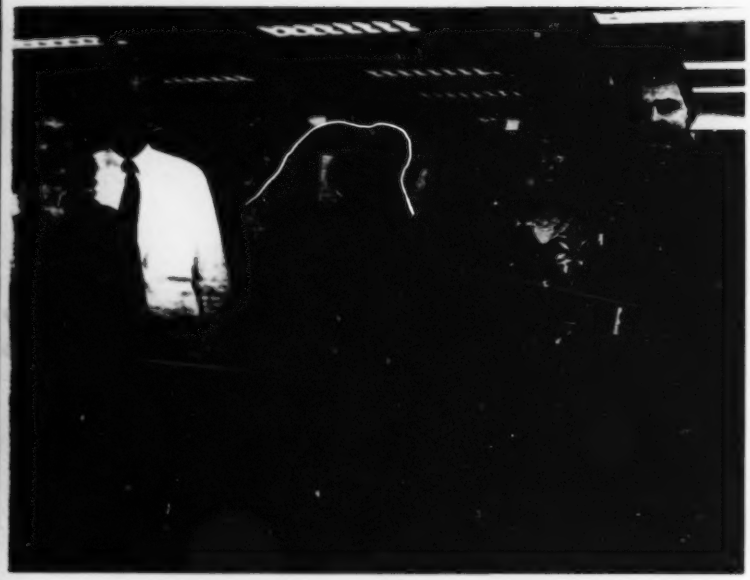
'One of the first things we tackled was the corporate pay slip – something everyone receives but few people could understand,' said Jenny. 'It used codes and numbers that had to be deciphered by the pay office.

'We've also introduced a writing skills course that is overwhelmingly popular.'

Jenny said office culture can be a major barrier to the spread of good communication. 'Older staff are often uncomfortable with plain English because they've become attached to more formal language. They prefer, "your account is in arrears" to, "you owe us ..." 'Younger staff warm to clear communication because it breaks down the barriers between people,' Jenny says. ●

'Office culture can be a major barrier to the spread of good communication.'

–Jenny Burn (right), manager information design group, NRMA



The team at the State Bank of New South Wales who put in place a money saving plan to improve internal communication.

Testing showed that comprehension levels of the weekly branch circular increased by up to 40% after it was made more reader friendly.

'It saves time and money if the person at the end of the line can understand your message and doesn't need to ring anyone up to decipher it.'

– Phil Dobbin, business practices manager, State Bank

PHOTOS: TRACEY SCHRAMM

State Bank finds another way to save

The State Bank of New South Wales Ltd is saving time and money with reader friendly documents and training for internal communication between staff.

The State Bank established a Plain English Unit in 1991 to deal with customer communication and internal communication.

About 200 administration and customer service staff have so far attended workshops which stress the economic benefits of writing in clear English.

The weekly staff circular has been revamped with plain English text and a reader friendly format. The bank has also produced a plain English standards manual.

'Staff are learning that writing in the active rather than passive voice and cutting out unnecessary words and information, is quicker and easier for the writer and reader,' said business practices manager Phil Dobbin.

'It saves time and money if the person at the end of the line can understand your message and doesn't need to ring anyone up to decipher it.

'Good communication has created its own momentum. Memos are easier to understand and other sections of the bank now send their documents to the Plain English Unit for quality control. Our staff recognise the benefits.'

Overcoming resistance

Phil said some long-term staff at first resisted the move to a more reader friendly approach.

'Some people had been here long enough to know a great deal about a subject and had lost sight of writing for an audience who didn't have that same level of knowledge,' he said.

'Our writing classes stress that respect for your audience is what effective communication is all about. Staff resistance has reduced because the benefits are clear to everyone.'

Phil said the bank's weekly circular was re-designed to separate and highlight 'facts' (details and reasons for a policy change) and 'action' (exactly what staff need to do).

'We surveyed staff in focus groups four months after we changed the format. Comprehension of the circular had risen by between 10 per cent and 40 per cent, depending on the experience and knowledge of staff surveyed.' ●

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Bridgestone gets rid of costly jargon

Instead of trying to simplify complex operating manuals, Bridgestone decided to ask workers to write instructions for their own machines.

'No one has actually calculated how much time is lost when people struggle to understand letters, memos, operating instructions, notices and the like. But I'd say the answer would be alarming.'

– Kathy Allen (right), Training Coordinator, Bridgestone Australia Ltd

PHOTOS: ROSEY BOEHM

Bridgestone Australia Ltd automotive components division integrated language and literacy skills into training programs some time ago. English training is supported by an open learning centre established with funding from the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program.

They soon realised they had to take another step to get the most from their training investment. They began to improve their internal communications.

'No one has actually calculated how much time is lost when people struggle to understand letters, memos, operating instructions, notices and the like. But I'd say the answer could be alarming,' said training coordinator Kathy Allen.

The company has begun the process with a pilot plain English workshop for health and safety representatives which aims to simplify internal documents.

Changing workplace culture

'We were generating a lot of documents which were quite complex. We had forms that a lot of people had difficulty filling out,' said Kathy.

'It's a waste of time distributing anything if the reader has to take it to five different people to get an interpretation of what it means,' she added.

Operators to rewrite manuals

Kathy said the next stage is a reader friendly approach to operating procedures in the plant.

'People spend a lot of time trying to decipher operating instructions. Rather than attempt to translate them, we will try a new approach and ask teams of workers to write instructions for their own machines.

'We have recently organised our workforce into self-managed teams. We will probably start by running training sessions with team leaders, to help them come up with an easier format for procedures.'

Staff in the employee relations and workers' compensation departments will also be taught skills to help them produce reader friendly documents and Kathy hopes managers and supervisors will follow. ●

Hints for effective communication

Effective communication in the workplace is a combination of a number of factors. Consider all these components carefully, to ensure the method you choose to deliver your message is the best for the target audience.

Content

Consider the needs of your reader as well as your own aim – how do they see or approach the issue; what do they want to know; what are their pre-conceptions; what's in it for them?

Make sure you're clear about what readers can or should do. Documents should provide clearly defined information or ask people to do something.

- Ask yourself, why am I writing this document?
- Define your target audience. Who will read this document?
- Clarify the main message you want to get across.
- Make sure the document contains all the information the reader needs and wants to know.
- Don't assume that the reader knows the subject as well as you do. Explain everything clearly.
- Think of your staff as internal customers. It may help you to write more effectively.

Computers can help you

Your word processing program may be able to help you improve your writing style. Some of the larger word processing programs include grammar check functions. Have a quick flit through this function – you may be surprised how helpful it is. Your computer may tell you that you have used the passive voice. It will even highlight which bits it finds offensive and suggest alternatives.

Aim for the right level

Some grammar functions will automatically calculate one or two kinds of readability scales. These scales work from a formula based on the length of words and sentences. One of these scales is the Gunning Fog index. This is commonly used by professional writers to aim at a particular level of reading skill.

For example:	Fog index 12	HSC graduate
	Fog index 15	University graduate
	Fog index 17	Postgraduate student

The average Australian has six years of primary schooling and four years of secondary schooling – a Fog index of 10.

References

Reader Friendly Documents Kit, Literacy and ESL Section, Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training; Newspaper Advertising Bureau of Australia; Workplace Skills Unit, Swinburne University of Technology; *Simply Better - The Case for Clearer Life Office Documents*, D. Kelly and C. Balmford, Life Insurance Federation of Australia; *Plain English - Its Credibility and Benefits*, C. Balmford and D. Kelly, Phillips Fox Solicitors; *Making Reader Friendly Publications*, Les Robinson, Social Change Media.

ILLUSTRATIONS MAGGIE RENVOIZE

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Language

Be brief – it reduces both the complexity of a document and the risk of information overload.

- Keep sentences and paragraphs short. Aim for a sentence of no more than 20-25 words.
- Avoid unnecessary jargon. Keep language simple and technical terms to a minimum. Choose words which will be familiar to the reader.
- Use the active rather than passive voice. 'We plan to make this document reader friendly,' is easier to read than, 'It is planned to make this document reader friendly.'
- Use verbs, not nouns made from verbs. Write: 'If the borrower does not pay,' not, 'In the event of default of payment by the borrower.'
- Communicate in specific and concrete terms, rather than generalities and abstractions.
- Be consistent. Don't say 'premises' in one part of the document and 'property' in another if you mean the same thing.
- Imagine you are explaining the facts in person. Use 'we' and 'you' to achieve a direct, personal approach.
- Repeat important points to reinforce the message.

Structure

How you organise your material is as important as what you say and how you say it.

- Start with an introduction which states the purpose of the document.
- Place important messages ahead of less important ones.
- Put related pieces of information together.
- Make sure instructions clearly state what to do, step-by-step, in logical sequence.
- Your message should be designed to get the reader to act.
- Provide headings, indexes and a table of contents to help readers find the information they need.
- Edit ruthlessly. Decide what is important and remove what is not. You may have to go through several drafts.
- Keep documents as short as possible.

Design

There's more than one way to get a message across. Don't assume you must stick to the same old format. A poster may work better than a standard memo, for example.

Identify your audience and the most effective communication method to reach those people.

Talk to them about how they 'read' a document and what they look at (if anything). Ensure the key points are easy to see.

Follow some of these basic design suggestions:

- Use lower case letters. SENTENCES IN CAPITAL LETTERS ARE HARDER TO READ.
- Use type sizes that are easy to read – at least 10 point. (This text is 10pt.)
- Avoid coloured text – it's harder to read than black. It is also difficult to photocopy.
- Don't cram everything together; leave plenty of white space around the text.
- Use subheadings: they help break up large blocks of text and guide the reader to the information.
- Make headings informative and to the point.
- Highlight important features. Use boxes and variations in colour.
- Use cartoons, illustrations, diagrams, examples and charts to get the message across. Calculate the expense in terms of cost per reader. An investment of a few cents per reader could pay big dividends.

Testing

- Don't assume a document you've used for years is actually serving its purpose. Look at it critically and ask others what they think.
- Testing should be seen as a vital part of the overall process.
- Test the document on the people who are likely to use it.
- Testing doesn't need to be complex or expensive. Even informal testing is better than no testing at all.
- Do not resist the feedback from testing. Use it to make your documents as clear as possible.

Alcoa staff find the computer based training easy to use

Alcoa uses computers to communicate

Computer games are making training easier for operators at Alcoa's Point Henry aluminium smelter near Geelong in Victoria.

The games are a key feature of a pioneering computer training program. It has made literacy training an integral part of skills training – without the need to refer to masses of paper.

The program uses text, graphics, animation, photographs and video material.

The pilot project is believed to be the first attempt by industry to deliver integrated competency-based process training and language development via computer.

The program was devised by Swinburne University of Technology in conjunction with Alcoa and the Federation of Industrial, Manufacturing and Engineering Employees. It was funded by the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program.

'We wanted to ensure that there were no language barriers when employees took part in skills training and moved through the classification structure,' said Alcoa's organisation, development, training and safety manager, Judy Wilmott.

'This computer based approach, coupled with our peer support and skill coaching initiatives, has meant that all employees have equal access to training.

'We wanted something which would allow people to attempt mainstream training at their own pace. Trainees can now increase their vocabulary, listening and writing skills, reading and comprehension, as well as computing skills through enjoyable games,' Judy said.

How it works

The computer program is self-paced and interactive. That is, the computer does not respond until the trainee has attempted an answer. But when the trainee attempts an answer, it provides clues and instant feedback. When the trainee makes a mistake it offers the chance to try again.

As one trainee said: 'It tells you everything step-by-step. You're the one who pushes the button. If you don't get something right, you can go back, so you understand.' ●

'This computer based approach has meant that all employees in the potroom have equal access to training.'

– Judy Wilmott, organisation, development, training and safety manager

An interactive computer-based training program has made learning enjoyable. The program gives instant feedback to users.

PHOTO: MARK STRACHAN

Legal can be simple
and it saves money

Some people believe documents must contain complicated jargon to have legal standing. This is not true. In fact, some Australian courts have ruled that documents which are unintelligible to consumers are invalid.

It is less likely there will be disputes and litigation when people understand their rights and obligations.

Judge rules against gobbledegook

In a recent case in the Supreme Court of the Australian Capital Territory,[1] the judge found that a bank could not enforce a guarantee because it was unintelligible.

He found that '...none of the persons present had any real knowledge of the nature and effect of the guarantee document. It was even impossible for the counsel appearing in the case to construe the first clause when asked. It was a single sentence, 1400 words long ... couched in incomprehensible legal gobbledegook.'

ILLUSTRATION: MARGARET HENWOOD

'A plain language document is a more challenging and professional enterprise – it accomplishes both precision and clarity.'

– Robert Eagleson, consultant to the Plain English Unit at Mallesons Stephen Jaques

'Organisations benefit from reduced complaints, queries and mistakes caused by misunderstandings.'

– Christopher Balmford, head, Plain English department, Phillips Fox Solicitors

Being reader friendly benefits everyone

Even the most complicated legal documents can be expressed clearly with all the necessary legal concepts preserved. Reader friendly or plain English legal documents offer significant advantages for organisations and consumers.

'Using reader friendly documents benefits everyone involved,' said Christopher Balmford, head of the Plain English department at Phillips Fox Solicitors in Melbourne.

'Consumers understand what they can and cannot do, they can make more informed decisions and can understand their rights and duties on the documents they sign.

'Organisations benefit from reduced complaints, queries and mistakes caused by misunderstandings. They need expert advice less often and have fewer disputes and litigation. Costs go down and compliance improves,' he said.

Robert Eagleson, consultant to the Plain English Unit at Mallesons Stephen Jaques, agrees that the law *can* be expressed simply.

'It is a myth that traditional drafting practices produce legally accurate statements. Errors, inadequacies, ambiguities and uncertainties are regularly found.

'The most competent legal drafting expresses the message accurately and enables it to be understood without difficulty and confusion. A plain language document is a more challenging and professional enterprise – it accomplishes both precision and clarity,' he said.

1 Houlahan and Houlahan v ANZ Banking Group, unreported judgment delivered 16 October 1992.

Common myths about being reader friendly

Formal documents can't be written in plain English. They need complex language and 'proper English'.

The aim is to get the message across quickly and easily so there is no confusion. A reader friendly document has clear, precise writing presented in a way that readers can easily understand. Being reader friendly saves money because it saves time.

If I write in plain English the documents won't be legally binding. Legal language is complex; there is no way you can make it plain.

The most complicated legal documents can be expressed clearly and simply. Documents do not need complex language and jargon to have the desired legal effect.
In fact, unintelligible documents in legalese may be unenforceable **(see p.13).**

If people had a reasonable standard of education, plain English documents wouldn't be necessary.

Education levels are not the issue. Even people with a university degree can be left totally confused by poorly thought out and badly written documents.

Clear communication is only needed for people from non-English speaking backgrounds who don't speak English very well.

Poorly written documents confuse all readers. If a message is badly written and designed, everyone will have trouble understanding it.

Making documents reader friendly will cost too much. That won't help our profit margin.

Using reader friendly documents will save you money. Improved information flow leads to greater efficiency and improved profit margins.
Even major investments by big firms in reader friendly programs reap dividends **(see p.7).**

It's not necessary. I can talk people through anything they don't understand.

You can, but every time you do, you waste time. What happens when you're not there and something is misunderstood? It could cost you thousands. It's essential to make sure documents and instructions make sense – to everyone.

Our processes require the use of long, difficult words. There is just no way around that. We can't possibly simplify our procedures manuals.

Being reader friendly or writing in plain English is not about getting rid of all the words with more than three letters. It is about understanding, clarity and good design. It is not large words which confuse readers, it is the way they are used. Using technical terms is not a problem, provided your target readers understand them.

People who can't understand documents and forms must be stupid.

Documents which are not reader friendly also confuse intelligent, educated people. A judge recently ruled that a contract wasn't binding because no one, not even members of the legal profession, could understand what it meant.

How to pick a communication problem

The best way to find out whether you have a communication problem is to ask your staff if they really understand all the things they need to read for their job. Use these questions as a guide.

Working with others

- Do you understand your supervisor's instructions?
- Can you answer your supervisor's questions?
- Do your supervisors/managers understand you when you give them information?
- Do you usually let someone else do the talking for you?

Reading

- Can you read and understand the machine manual?
- Can you read and understand the instructions on the job sheet?
- Do you rely on someone else to fill out forms for you?
- Can you read and understand safety signs?

Understanding

- Can you fill in the accident report form?
- Do you understand what people say at meetings?
- Can you follow written materials handed out at training sessions?
- Can you understand the trainer's spoken instructions?
- Can you make useful notes at training sessions?
- How do you find out about changes at work?
- How would you like to find out about changes at work?
- Do customers say they don't understand your workplace documents? (letters, notices, instructions, delivery notes).

Source: *Key Questions for Addressing Workplace Communication Needs*, Labor Council of NSW and Chamber of Manufactures of NSW.

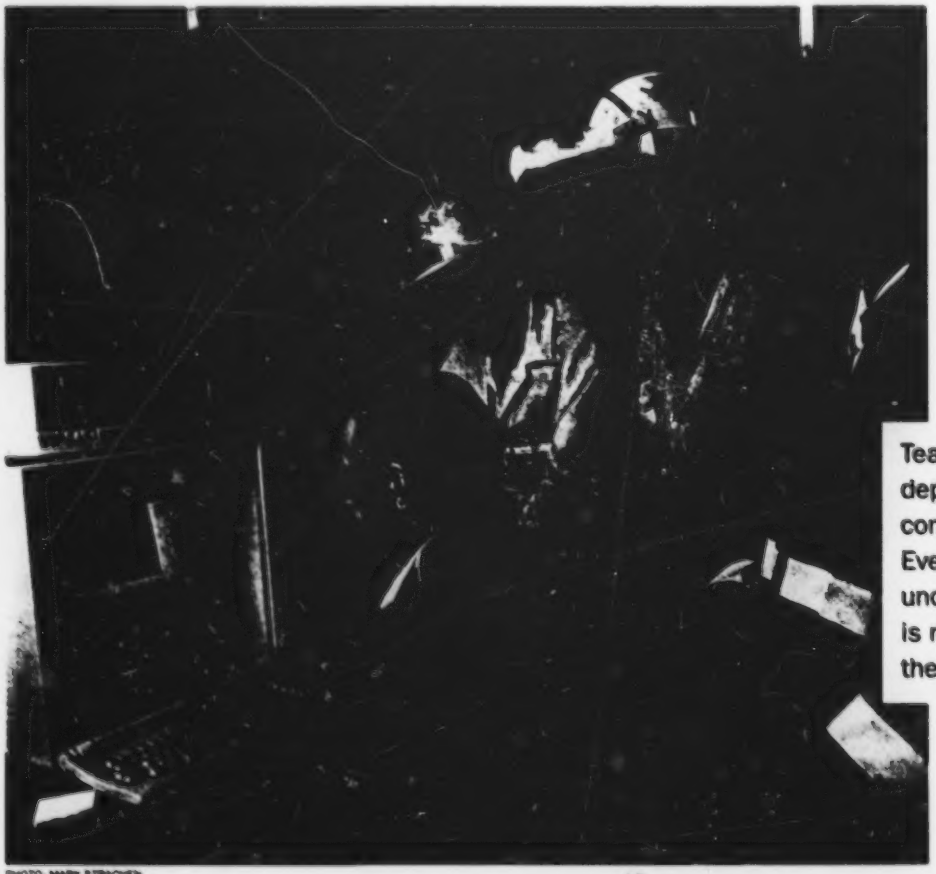


PHOTO: MARK STRACHEN

Teamwork depends on good communication. Everyone must understand what is required of them.

Arrowcrest saves on compo claims

'We can't afford to have job instructions misunderstood. If you send a few wheels to Japan which don't meet their standards, and they send them back, bang goes your profit margin!'

– Andrew Gleeson, general manager (human resources), Arrowcrest

PHOTO: ROSEY BOLDM

A reader friendly approach to workers' compensation claims has achieved big savings for the Adelaide-based Arrowcrest Group of Companies.

Arrowcrest makes auto parts and shelving. The company is exempt under South Australia's WorkCover legislation from making regular workers' compensation contributions. Instead, the group undertakes to provide its own cover. They make internal decisions on workers' compensation claims. Workers denied claims can appeal to WorkCover for a review.

Helping people understand their rights

The number of invalid or incorrect workers' compensation claims fell dramatically when Arrowcrest rewrote claim forms and supporting documents in a reader friendly format, said general manager (human resources), Andrew Gleeson.

'Within a year, the number of appeals dropped from tens and fifteens to ones and twos,' Andrew said.

'We believe that's because we provided a clearer explanation of the technicalities of the law, the rights and obligations of workers, and the procedures to be followed in making initial claims.

'More people filled out their claim forms correctly and there were fewer claims in dispute because employees had a better understanding of the law.

'Plain English has the potential to easily save us hundreds of thousands of dollars in a year.'

Workers demand a clearer message

'We never had any complaints about our old workers' compensation material, with all its impenetrable legalese,' said Andrew. 'People were too embarrassed to raise the issue. They just struggled on and hoped they got it right.'

When you start using reader friendly communication, it generates its own momentum. Arrowcrest is now working on standard operating procedures with short words, simple sentences and graphics.

'We can't afford to have job instructions misunderstood. If you send a few wheels to Japan which don't meet their standards, and they send them back, bang goes your profit margin!' said Andrew. ●

After reader friendly documents have been used for a while, they start to create their own momentum, according to Andrew Gleeson, pictured (left) with fellow employees.

When being reader friendly helps

PHOTO: PETER D'HALLORAN

Good communication skills will make sure that the message is understood.

Reading

- Reading background information for meetings, like production reports, graphs and tables.
- Reading newsletters and notices.
- Reading financial statements.
- Reading and writing agendas and minutes.
- Reading and writing formal memos.
- Reading and writing work procedures.

Writing

- Writing incident reports.
- Writing informal notes and messages.
- Filling out requisition or stocktake forms.
- Preparing budgets.

Understanding

- Interpreting or drawing diagrams.
- Interpreting or compiling statistics.
- Filling out surveys and questionnaires.

Source: Bill Cope, NLLIA Centre for Workplace Communication & Culture, Sydney

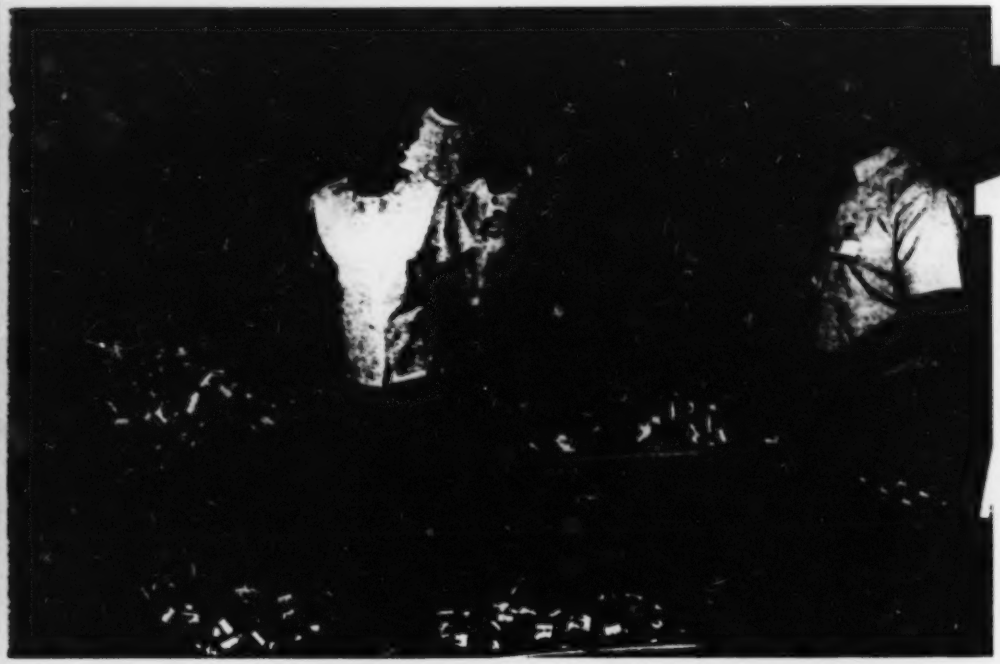
The ***Reader Friendly Documents Kit*** provides detailed information on the importance of being reader friendly when you communicate with your clients. It provides pointers to guide you in the right direction.

With easy-to-photocopy loose-leaf sheets, the kit has sections on:

- The link with profit and productivity
- What being reader friendly means
- But is it legal?
- A guide to help you become reader friendly
- How to improve documents
- Reader friendly resources
- Case studies

Available **free** from the Literacy and ESL Section, Department of Employment, Education and Training.

Tel: (06) 240 9086 Fax: (06) 240 9202



'It's critical for the recurring audits for AS3902 that everyone understands exactly what instructions say.'

– Frank O'Sullivan, training coordinator, Exicom

Frank O'Sullivan (top left) and members of the benchmarking group.

Communicating for best practice at Exicom

Workers at an electronics manufacturing plant are learning reader friendliness skills in producing as part of the company's benchmarking for best practice.

Exicom employees at Villawood in Sydney visit other companies to find out about trends in quality and product improvement, training and teamwork. This process is known as 'benchmarking' – comparing your standards and performance to industry best practice.

It's a major project funded through the Best Practice Demonstration Program run by the Commonwealth Department of Industrial Relations.

The key to its success is learning how to ask planned and meaningful questions and report findings succinctly and accurately, said Exicom training coordinator Frank O'Sullivan.

'Our benchmarking groups are made up of volunteers ranging from young shop floor people to senior management,' Frank said.

'Regardless of their position, they all go through a training program together and go on inspections as a team.

'Training starts with a three-day course and they could follow up with eight or nine, two-hour sessions on top of that. They learn what they need to look at and why, techniques for drawing out information, and compiling and presenting reports.

'We teach people how to be comfortable when speaking to a group – things like voice modulation, eye contact, body language, listening for clues from an audience – how to ask open rather than closed questions, and how to structure a speech and a report.'

Frank believes putting work instructions into a reader friendly form is vital in maintaining AS3902 quality accreditation.

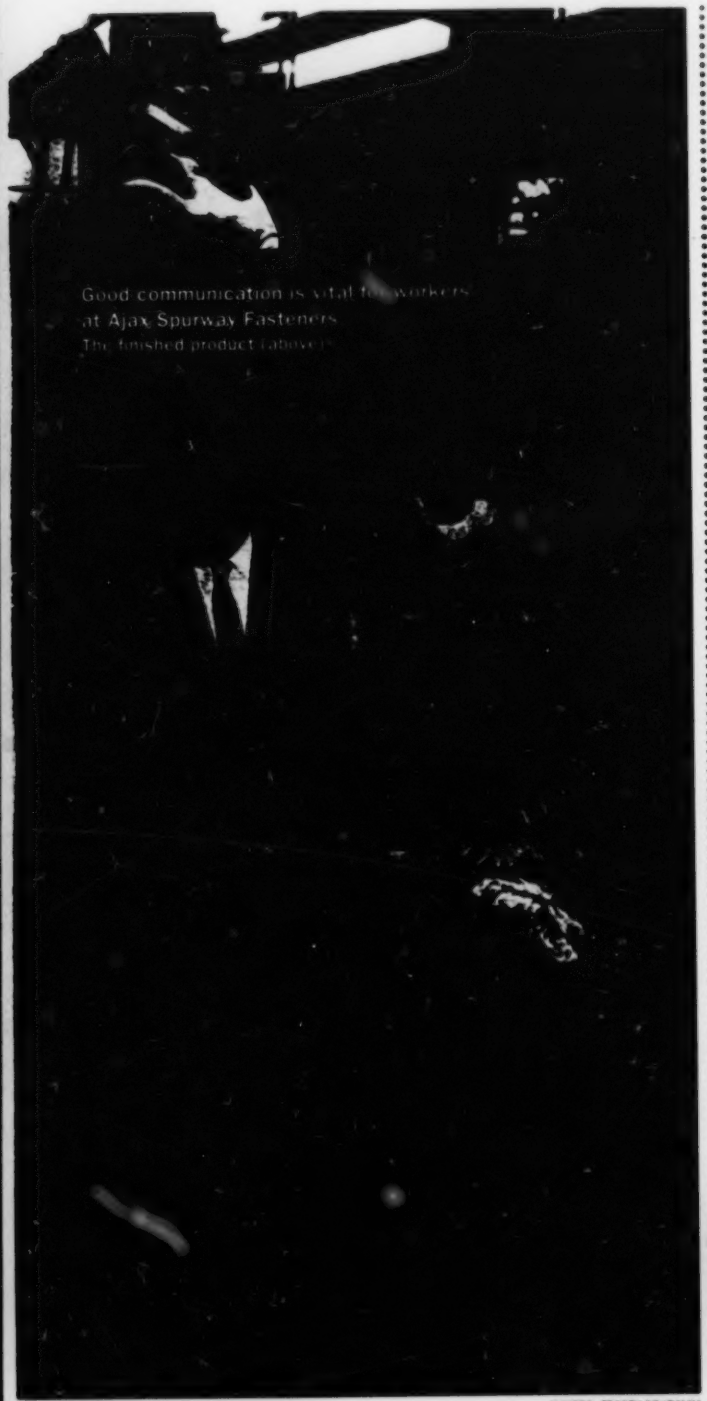
'It's critical for the recurring audits which are carried out for AS3902 that people understand exactly what instructions say. They have to show the auditors that they understand and follow the instructions.

'Rewriting instructions and procedures is becoming a big job. It requires someone to talk to individual workers to see if they understand the documentation, and to team leaders and supervisors to find out what problems exist in getting messages through,' said Frank. ●

Good communication skills are essential at Exicom, where instructions and operating procedures are being rewritten by workplace teams.

PHOTOS: TRACEY SCHRAMM

Make the most of computer based training



Good communication is vital for workers at Ajax Spurway Fasteners. The finished product (above) is

PHOTOS: TRACEY SCHRAMM

At Ajax Spurway Fasteners in Sydney, general manager Garry Ferris realises reader friendly documents will play an important part in the changing workplace.

'As our people seek to go up the career path they'll have to be able to read and write more effectively,' he said.

'Class 11 workers must be able to perform a particular type of machine setting. To move up to class 10 they have to handle a wider range of measurements and paper work, and take more responsibility for inputting work into a computer.

'Reader friendly documents will make training material and computer information more accessible.'

Multi-skilling in the computerised workplace

Workers' capacity to become multi-skilled depends on their communication skills. Extensive use of computers and robotics have made production machinery more flexible, but it is also more demanding.

Workers have to keep up with constant changes, read (and understand) computer print-outs and respond to on-screen messages.

Get the programs right

Management consultant Jenny Beaumont said running computer controlled machinery puts the onus on companies to refine workplace language.

'You have to be very specific when programming small controllers or computers,' Jenny said.

'If you want someone to turn a controller on or off you have to program it so it says clearly, "turn off now".

'Computer-oriented workplaces often work best when people can hit a button to get the required format. A reader friendly approach is vital when setting up the formats,' she said. ●

'As our people seek to go up the career path they'll have to be able to read and write more effectively.'

– Garry Ferris, general manager, Ajax Spurway Fasteners.

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Building industry benefits from clear forms

Clear and effective forms, letters and instructions are making life easier for clients and staff of the Queensland Building and Construction Industry Portable Long Service Leave Board.

'Making our written communication to clients reader friendly has meant more effective and faster handling of telephone inquiries,' said the Board's client services manager, Rod Andersen.

Portable long service leave is not always easy to explain. The building industry has an itinerant workforce moving from State to State. Many employees are from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Design is important

To reduce confusion, the Board implemented a three-phase program – document wording and design; staff awareness and continual review of forms, brochures and correspondence.

'As well as simplifying vocabulary and sentence structure, we used a graphic designer to ensure forms were easy to follow,' Rod said.

'Devices such as colour bars and tick boxes were definitely a help. Forms were designed and coloured to form a family and to ensure easy identification over the phone.'

Ongoing review

The Board's telephone inquiry staff regularly review and edit correspondence, forms and brochures.

'The staff who experience the benefits of clearer telephone communication with clients have a major influence on the redesign of written communication,' said Rod.

'Our documentation is not perfect, but now at least the need for plain English is at the back of everyone's mind.' ●

'As well as simplifying vocabulary and sentence structure, we used a graphic designer to ensure forms were easy to follow.'

– Rod Andersen, client services manager

Devices such as colour bars and tick boxes have made forms more reader friendly.

PHOTOS: PETER O'HALLORAN

tips to help you become reader-friendly

Research

- Ask people using current material what they think of it and what they need. Don't base your program only on a senior management view of the problem.
- Test drafts of new material before you send it out.

Planning

- Don't try to change a big organisation all at once. Working with small groups, department by department, will allow you to gain people's confidence and get quicker results. Try to gain support from all departments, especially supervisors in production, training and personnel.
- Involve workers and management in assessing and rewriting their own material. People are more inclined to read something they have helped produce.

Training

- When you want to introduce communication training, use any systems which already exist in your company.
- Use the consultative committee. A useful starting point may be to determine what people can read and understand. Ask members to show sample documents to their workmates. They are often the first to be asked, 'What does this mean?'
- Keep the program flexible. Trainers often have to modify their approach when the program is under way.
- Make it voluntary. Ask the consultative committee to help find volunteers from all departments or areas.

Costs

- Find an approach which suits your budget. Reader friendliness classes and rewriting projects can be delivered in a variety of ways. Some organisations employ a full-time expert. Others opt for distance learning where employees follow a program and consult a tutor when they have a problem.
- Clear communication and plain English courses are built in to some established training programs. Remember, your training costs will probably be tax deductible and eligible as Training Guarantee expenditure.

Involvement

- Encouragement can overcome resistance. People may feel slighted if asked to rewrite their own material. Let them know you think their work is good, but suggest it could be improved by making the language clearer. Trainers can offer suggestions, but they should let people do it themselves as much as possible.
- Put the problem in context. Staff may be more motivated to change their language and writing style if it's suggested in the context of new workplace organisational systems like Total Quality Management (TQM) or best practice.
- Aim for consistency. Try to standardise written language throughout the organisation. You could run the same program for all staff and get them to correspond with each other. Executives can be brought into a shop floor class – especially if management practices require managers and workers to write to each other more.

Find out more about good communication

Communication News, newsletter of the Communication Research Institute of Australia. Available from the CRIA. Tel. (06) 257 3155. Price on application.

Designing Information for People, Robyn Penman and David Sless (eds). Communication Research Press, Canberra, 1992. Available from CRIA. Tel. (06) 257 3155. Price on application.

Government Forms Testing: Use of Market Research for the Testing of Government Forms, by Maggie Lynton, June 1985. Available from the Office of Government Information and Advertising, Canberra. Tel. (06) 275 3000.

Key Questions for Addressing Workplace Communication Needs. Labor Council of NSW & Chamber of Manufactures. Available from the Labor Council of NSW. Tel. (02) 264 1691. Free.

Making Reader Friendly Publications: How to Produce Newsletters, Leaflets and Manuals that People Will Want to Read, by Les Robinson. Social Change Media, 1989. Available from Social Change Media. Tel. (02) 519 3299. $4.95.

The Pocket Guide to Plain English, by Jane Cotter. Resource Unit, Adult Literacy Basic Education, Tasmania, 1990. Tel. (004) 231 234. $4.

Writing in Plain English, by Professor Robert Eagleson. Office of Government Information and Advertising (OGIA) plain English manual. Available from Commonwealth Government Bookshops. $16.95.

- **For a more comprehensive list of references, see the Reader Friendly Contacts & Resources booklet, details page 7.**

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A large number of managers gave us their time to help make sure we got the message right. Thanks to everyone who helped produce this publication. Your advice, comment and information has been invaluable to help us research and write this magazine. Special thanks to:

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Denise Oakley, Outer Eastern College of TAFE
David Sless, Communication Research Institute of Australia
Malcolm Swaine, Insurance Institute of Australia
Lorna Tilley, Department of Industrial Relations
Judy Wilmott, Alcoa
Linda Wyse, Linda Wyse & Associates.

A lot of time and money is spent writing documents to convey information in the workplace. Often they fail to get the message across. People simply do not understand what is required of them.

Many people think reader friendly communication concerns only people with English language difficulties. This is not the case.
Poor communication affects everybody.

A workplace that communicates effectively will be more productive.

Simon Crean
Minister for Employment, Education and Training

Funding help is available

The Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program provides Commonwealth Government funding for organisations to introduce English language and literacy training in the workplace.

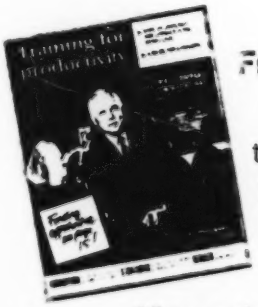
The program can provide funding for:

- The delivery of workplace English language and literacy training.
- The development of resources for that training.

Improved language and literacy skills in the workplace contribute to increased productivity, improved occupational health and safety and improved communication.

For further information contact the Workplace English Language and Literacy program coordinator.

Tel: (06) 257 6933 Fax: (06) 240 9202



Free colour magazines for managers

Many companies have already introduced training programs which include English language and literacy. You can read their success stories in the first of the *Training for Productivity* magazines, *Invest in Literacy.*

Managing a diverse workforce

This magazine will show how companies can benefit from unlocking the potential of their workforce. Find out how companies have discovered hidden talent after English language training. Order your copies now.

Tel: (06) 240 9086 Fax: (06) 240 9202

Order your free copy of this handy guide

The ***Reader Friendly Contacts and Resources*** booklet is a detailed national listing of reader friendly consultants. Presented in an easy-to-use State by State format, it lists consultants who can help you improve your internal and external communication.

Available FREE from the Literacy and ESL Section, Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training.

Tel: (06) 240 9086 Fax: (06) 240 9202

2 things you can do now

1. Order the free *Reader Friendly Contacts and Resources* booklet for a list of professionals who can help you improve the way your company communicates.
2. Find out about funding for English language and literacy training.

☐ I'd like to know more about funding

☐ I'd like a FREE copy of the *Reader Friendly Contacts and Resources* booklet

Name

Position

Organisation

Address Postcode

Phone Fax

Photocopy and fax to (06) 240 9202

STOP

Make sure your company is not left behind!

You must communicate effectively to succeed in the 1990s

Meet quality standards

All Australian companies are doing their utmost to reach quality standards.

To get accreditation to international quality standards **everyone** in your workplace must understand workplace procedures.

Save money

You can save a fortune by making sure the message is understood the first time.

The NRMA is saving hundreds of thousands of dollars by making their communication clear and easy to follow. Other companies have also made huge savings. You can do the same.

Get it right the first time

A written instruction that is misunderstood could cost your company a fortune in lost productivity.

Even if it's not a major disaster, whenever people have to get a second opinion on something they've read, they are wasting your money. Make sure they understand it the first time.

Think before you write

Don't do it the same way just because that's the way it's always been done.

Think about your message. Maybe there is a better way. A message on the computer might be better than a newsletter. Maybe a poster is better than a memo.

Aim for your audience

Make sure the message is right for the people who have to read it.

The people who have to read the document you write should be able to understand it easily. Being reader friendly doesn't mean you can't use technical words. It means you have to make sure the message is understood.

Test it before you use it

Never assume you've got it right.

Test everything. Even informal testing, like getting a couple of the people you are writing the document for to look at it, is better than nothing. Make sure people can do more than just read it – make sure they understand what you are telling them, or asking them to do.

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Language & Literacy

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